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Aircraft: The Achilles' Heel of the Bolivian Cocaine Industry

Aircraft are the primary means of trafficker transport both within Bolivia and to neighboring countries. Disrupting air trafficking through the interdiction of air routes or the seizure of aircraft would seriously impede, or even shut down, the activities of some trafficker organizations. At the present time, the lack of proper training, equipment, and experience suggest that the complex art of air interception may not be a viable option for the Bolivian Air Force (BAF). However, increased enforcement of existing laws could result in the confiscation of significant numbers of trafficker aircraft.

Air transportation plays a crucial role in the cocaine collection and processing cycles in Bolivia. The poorly developed surface transportation systems in Bolivia afford traffickers few options for moving coca derivatives and precursor chemicals. The limited rail network does not service the primary coca cultivation or processing areas, and the poorly maintained road systems are subject to routine roadblocks by police authorities. Although river networks in central and northern Bolivia are used by traffickers to move some coca products and precursors, aircraft remain the primary mode of transport both within Bolivia and to surrounding countries. Denying traffickers the use of either aircraft or airspace would seriously cripple some Bolivian cocaine networks.

Aerial Interdiction: Beyond Bolivia's Current Capabilities

Any efforts by the Bolivian Air Force to intercept airborne traffickers would be hindered by inadequate radar coverage, obsolete jet fighters, as well as pilots and ground controllers with little or no training in air intercept missions. The proposed deployment of new advanced mobile radars to provide coverage of airspace used by traffickers might enable authorities to monitor flight patterns but would do little to restrict flight activity. The primary fighter/interceptor of the BAF is the T-33, a small, fair-weather, jet-powered

fighter/trainer designed during the 1940s. Limited BAF facilities, along with the operational limitations of this aircraft, render the T-33 a poor choice for interceptor roles.

A more viable candidate currently in the BAF inventory is the Swiss-made Pilatus PC-7, a turboprop aircraft normally used for basic, transition, and aerobatic training. In addition to being faster and more maneuverable than most of the aircraft used by traffickers, the PC-7, unlike the T-33, would have little trouble operating from dirt airstrips. However, it would have to be armed and, like the T-33, it is not equipped with an air intercept radar. This shortcoming would necessitate ground controllers vectoring BAF aircraft along intercept azimuths until visual contact could be made. Although this could conceivably be accomplished during fair weather and daylight hours, nighttime or cloudy weather intercepts would be extremely difficult, if not impossible. The effective use of either the T-33 or PC-7 for airborne interdiction would require careful coordination between both ground controllers and pilots well trained in the air intercept role.

The Alternative: Operation Screaming Eagle

Since maintaining control of private aircraft flight activities within Bolivian airspace is presently beyond government capabilities, aircraft denial through confiscation can achieve greater results. Article 71 of Bolivia's antinarcotics law 1008 provides a legal basis for the immediate seizure of assets found to be supporting cocaine processing or trafficking activities. More vigorous enforcement of this antinarcotics law at a few select airports could greatly curtail the operations of many Bolivian cocaine traffickers.

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The Screaming Eagle program is designed to enforce this law. The program, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] consists of Bolivian chemists and police vacuuming suspect aircraft and conducting on-site analysis of the dust samples taken. By chemically confirming the presence of minute traces of coca residue that remain after the coca products are removed, the counternarcotics police are able to determine if an aircraft has been used for trafficking. Before the initiation of Screaming Eagle in late 1988, aircraft had to be "caught in the act" of transporting coca derivatives in order to be seized. [REDACTED]

Although Screaming Eagle has resulted in the seizure of about 30 aircraft since its inception, we believe the full potential of this program has yet to be realized. Certain unanticipated problems, such as press leaks of impending operations and occasional resistance by local populations, have hampered some Screaming Eagle raids. At the present time, however, this program offers the single best method of attacking the transportation networks of traffickers within Bolivia. [REDACTED]

More aggressive Screaming Eagle raids in just a few locations could result in the confiscation of a large percentage of the trafficking aircraft in Bolivia. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] indicate that many of the cocaine smuggling aircraft are normally housed at airports near a few cities and towns that serve as trafficking hubs within Bolivia. We believe that carefully orchestrated Screaming Eagle operations would yield the greatest results at the airports in Santa Cruz (Trompillo AP), Trinidad, Cochabamba, and Santa Ana. [REDACTED]

In addition, our analysis of past Screaming Eagle operations indicates that a few modifications might improve the results of Screaming Eagle raids:

- *Better airport isolation.* Security fences need to close airport ingress/egress routes, block runways, and secure control towers. Using vehicles to block runways would quickly shut down fixed-wing air operations yet permit legitimate aircraft arrivals or departures with only a few minutes notice.

- *Enhanced preoperation security.* Knowledge of planned operations should be kept to a minimum in view of the corruption factor.
- *Careful mission timing.* Late night or early morning raids are likely to catch more aircraft on the ground than operations conducted during the middle of the day.
- *Better use of intelligence.* Airport size, approximate number of aircraft that will be present, and possible hostile reactions by traffickers or local population must be evaluated before the operation takes place to ensure adequate personnel and equipment are detailed for the operation. A list of suspect aircraft and traffickers that operate out of the airport should be compiled before the operation.
- *Equipment.* Previous raids have indicated that sometimes special equipment, for example, riot gear, is required in addition to the normal complement of weapons/testing gear used by police and chemists. Needless to say, sufficient communications equipment, weapons, and training are essential to ensure the safety of counternarcotics personnel on these operations. [REDACTED]